DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 348 UD 024 617

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TITLE Before and After Brown: Education Context of Change.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 17p.; In: Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: An Assessment Thirty Years Later (Institute, West Virginia, February 10-11 and April 11-13, 1984). For proceedings, see UD 024 606.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Education; *Black History; Civil Rights; Curriculum; Desegregation Effects; *Equal Education; *Politics of Education; *Racial Bias; *Racial Relations; *United States History

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the educational experiences of blacks before and after the Brown decision of 1954. During slavery religious organizations, sympathetic whites, and blacks themselves led the effort toward literacy for slaves. Following the Civil War, blacks initially made great strides in establishing educational opportunities. By 1877, white supremacy was renewed, along with the promise to provide "separate but equal" school facilities. New constitutional interpretations and statutory laws institutionalized segregation and discrimination. For the next 100 years, the primary responsibility for black education fell again into the hands of individuals and private societies. Most black colleges founded during this time offered education in the liberal arts, and the striking successes of these schools led many to struggle to maintain them after the Brown decision. Some of the effects of this decision on curriculum, enrollment, and educational policy are described. Improving the educational situation for blacks has been a struggle with positive changes clouded by negative setbacks. (KH)

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BEFORE AND AFTER BROWN: EDUCATION CONTEXT OF CHANGE

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Educational change for a people comes about when a decision is made to act in their interest and the ability to change is essential to any sound education. For me, the term education suggests a continuous learning process which prepares one to live in and serve their community based on an accumulation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and cultural values. Such an education prepares one to develop a positive self concept, analyze critically their experiences, and prepares them for a highly competitive society.

For Black Americans, one of the most important and challenging changes has been their struggle for freedom and equality in the area of education. Many Blacks have viewed education as a major vehicle to their intellectual, social, political, and economic advancement. However, the Black community has gone through many reactionary changes in pursuit of an education. This has occurred because many African Americans believed that the white male power structure would treat them justly; that a racist constitution, 3/5 of a man clause, would protect their rights; that their God would punish the wicked for being evil, and because they have not been effective in creating political changes. This evening it is the purpose of this paper to call your attention to some of the educational concerns that existed before and after the Brown vs. Topeka decision of 1954 and to examine some of the ways Blacks tried to change the various conditions influencing the educational environment under which they were functioning.

In his book, Before the Mayflower, Lerone Bennett claims that the first seventy-five years when African Americans settled in this land with Europeans

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Presented at the Symposium celebrating Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court Decision of 1954 (Institute, WV, February 10-11 and April 11-13, 1984).

they were free to associate and pursue whatever formal educational opportunities that were available without regard to race, color, or creed. However, in the mid-seventeenth century as boat loads of Africans arrived in the colonies, the Euorpeans began to extend privileges and rewards to indentured servants and instituted laws which placed African Americans in a state of servitude. The practice of white supremacy vs. Black inferiority became the custom and laid the foundation for educational practices which are still with us today. The education of free Blacks was severly hampered by custom and to secure slavery the teaching of reading and writing to a slave was made illegal throughout the South. Most whites began to support the theory that education would make Africans unfit for slavery.

However, the labor needs of the slave system and the skills which Africans already possessed established a concept of educational and work practices which were to be institutionalized in earnest after 1865. As slaves, Africans were trained and educated to speak some English, prepare the food, cultivate the crops, make the tools, build the houses, design and sew the clothes, shoe the horses, and perform many other skilled tasks which allowed for the development of a number of skilled artisans. Therefore, Africans proved they were capable of learning and that the white man's theory of their inability to learn was a lie. These anti-Black customs and attitudes from a hostile society meant that the educational development of Blacks and their sense of equality in living and learning could only be accomplished through constant struggle and change.

It is in this setting that some artisans as well as other Blacks and a few white individuals and groups led the effort toward literacy for slaves. They were not content to wait for American society to change the laws or for the federal government to guarantee the slaves an education. So it is in these early

years before the Civil War that slaves and free African Americans seized every educational opportunity to acquire some degree of literacy and move closer to freedom.

Under the cover of night and against the law, a few adult slaves were taught by sympathetic whites such as Sarah and Angelina Grinke.[1] Robert Russa Moton was taught by the family for whom he worked and William Heard hired someone to teach him. Thomas H. Jones and Frederick Douglass taught themselves to read[2] while others attended clandestine schools similar to the one operated by Mella Granson. Ms. Granson would teach each class of students what she had learned from the children of one of her previous owners.[3] Even slave children realized the value of knowing how to read and write and often learned the rudiments of an education from their white playmates. Richard Singuefield took advantage of such an opportunity from those with whom he played.[4]

A few religious organizations and leaders such as Dr. Thomas Bray, who founded the Society for the Propogation of the Gospel, provided an elementary level of education for the purpose of promoting the Christian doctrine. Other groups such as the Presbyterians were active in promoting literacy among the slaves and sent John Chavis to Princeton University as an experiment to determine whether Blacks could handle a formal classical education in an institution of higher education.[5]

Some African Americans who were educated possessed a defiant spirit and their knowledge motivated them to seek equality. Those Blacks who could read and write kept the illiterate slaves informed and served as an inspiration and example of what the tools of education could accomplish. The fears of white America were supported when the Blacks in Charleston revolted after reading and hearing about the debate on the Missouri Compromise. David Walker in his Appeal urged the slaves to rise up against their masters. The Appeal was distributed

widely among the slaves and is believed to have contributed to unrest among them. African Americans such as Austin Steward, Thomas Jones, Lunceford Lane and William Wells Brown gained an education while slaves and after escaping became writers and speakers in the anti-slavery movement.[6]

During the two hundred and some fifty years of slavery, many of those Blacks who became educated were a part of the leadership that kept the urge for and the trend towards education before Black Americans. Educated men and women like Susie King Taylor, Denmark Vasey and Martin Delany kept the possibility for change before their brothers and sisters by writing and speaking out against slavery, plotting and carrying out revolts, and teaching. Furthermore, the educated Blacks were a constant reminder to white Americans and to the uneducated Blacks that they were capable of learning; servitude was not a natural state and indeed the fears of Southern whites that education would make Blacks unfit for slavery was justified.

It was during the Civil War that certain events took place that made it possible for a different educational climate to exist. As Blacks fled to the Union lines, an appeal was made by the military leadership to provide some form of assistance for the refugees. However, the federal government moved slowly in responding to this request. The starving and suffering among the Black refugees was so severe that private individuals formed clubs such as the Contraband Relief Society and some religious groups organized to provide money, food, and clothing to meet the needs of the ex-slaves. Many private agencies sought to aid the freedmen by providing an education.[7]

Many of these various organizations started Sunday School, day and evening school which were attended by both children and adults. By 1863 the ex-slaves in most areas controlled by Union forces were being educated by sympathetic men and women from the North.

It was not until 1865, two years after private assistance had been initiated, that the federal government established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands to meet the general needs of the refugee and assist the freedmen in acquiring the skills for facing a free and independent life. The greatest success by the Freedmen's Bureau, as it became know, was in the area of education. It cooperated with the private and religious organizations and organized day, night, and Sunday schools, industrial institutions, and colleges. Although most teachers were Northern whites with a few Southerners, it was during this period that the number of Black teachers grew and gradually assumed the responsibility of educating Black children. [8] Schools were started such as the three organized by the Black women in Natchez. The Black community in Savannah founded two schools and a board of education to establish policies.[9]

Although the arrival of the Northern teachers was the opening of new educational opportunities for Blacks, it was during the Reconstruction Period that educational institutions were formally established.[10] It was the leadership of the Black legislators in the Reconstruction governments that led to the establishment of public schools in the South and it was during this time that a number of Blacks built their own schools and paid teachers to educate themselves and their children.[11] When the Reconstruction Period ended, the freed African Americans had a taste of and passion for education which was only equaled by the Southern whites vindictive attitude against their education.

The negative response of the Southern whites to the quest for an education by Blacks was exhibited by burning their schools and insulting and beating the Northern teachers. When these hostile whites finally realized that the education of Blacks was inevitable and they could not stop the momentum started during the war, they became determined to control the type and quality of that education. They initiated a view that the education of Blacks would be based on the labor

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needs of the South and that African Americans should not receive the same education as whites. Thus, in 1877, the educational system was to see the end of equal opportunities for Black and white youth and the renewal of white supremacy with the promise to provide "separate but equal" school facilities.

As the Reconstruction Period came to a close and the Federal Government abandoned Blacks, laws were passed in Southern states to require segregated schools and once again the educational context for Blacks was established by white America. Black and white children were separated by segregated schools but they certainly were not educated in schools that were equal. Schools attended by Blacks received less funding, operated fewer days and Black teachers were paid lower salaries. These schools were further handicapped by being denied access to auxiliary services such as public libraries.

To add insult to injury, the Supreme Court nullified the liberties granted Blacks by the Fourteenth Amendment. In the Slaughter House Case of 1873, the courts redefined the Fourteenth Amendment by saying citizenship in the Federal government was separate from the citizenship within a state. Then in 1883, the Civil Rights Act was nullified and the South once again had full control to limit the rights of African Americans. This was demonstrated by the passing of a series of statutes, ordinances, and customs which required complete separation of the races--drinking fountains, parks, waiting rooms, theaters, restaurants, and rest rooms. These new constitutional interpretations and limiting statutory laws institutionalized segregation and discrimination and set the tone for education and the struggle that would be necessary for almost 100 years.

This struggle was further aggravated by the abandonment of federal and state support. Blacks realized these negative reactions to their efforts to acquire an education must be confronted because the quality of their education was closely related to their degree of freedom. Missionary societies, church

groups as well as the federal government, funded such institutions as Atlanta University, Shaw, Morgan State, Fisk and Howard. The passing of the Morrill Acts made funds available for the development of land-grant colleges. Although the first Act of 1862 was not intended to support the education of Blacks, it was this act that was the basis for the founding of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College and under the second Morrill Act of 1890 several Black land-grant colleges were founded. At the time of their development these Black institutions were designed to be primarily college preparatory and were little better than secondary schools. However, under the Black leadership of such men as Hiram Revel and John Burris many were to become accredited colleges by the early 20th century.

It is during this period that the debate over the type of education best suited for Blacks was begun. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois expounded on the opposing views. Mr. Washington and his followers believed an industrial education was best for Black men and women. Although Blacks were to be taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, the emphasis was to be in the crafts for men and domestic skills for women. Washington saw success for Blacks through preparation for meeting the labor needs that whites were willing to allow them to hold. He believed having a way to make a living would allow Blacks to fight oppression by proving through example what fine, moral, useful, and hardworking citizens they were and they could further demonstrate their ability to save money and acquire property.

W. E. B. DuBois and other educated Blacks such as J. H. Magee and John Mercer Langston believed Blacks needed a liberal education. Mr. DuBois believed a liberally educated person should have broad knowledge of the universe, be able to critically analyze their world, have as a solid basis a sound foundation for living, and ability to become a thinking person. Although W. E. B. DuBois agreed

that one needed training for making a living, he emphasized the intellectual development of the mind.

These two philosophies of education and the issue of integration were the concerns that constituted much of the thoughts and efforts of Blacks in trying to seek an equal and quality education. The majority of African Americans believed that their needs could best be met through a broad liberal arts education and it was this type of education which dominated the institutions for Blacks. They also believed that this type of education could best be organized through integration. Thus the backdrop was established for the next phase of the struggle that African Americans were to pursue.

Although the majority of Blacks were receiving a liberal arts education, there was a mass effort to integrate the schools. In fact, the majority of the presidents, trustees, and faculty in the Black institutions of higher learning were whites and were paternalistic and dictatorial. The Trustee Boards were controlled by Northerners who withheld funds from institutions that did not behave the way whites felt Blacks should and the white administrators fired the professors and dismissed the students whom they considered radicals.[12]

Such condescending attitudes motivated Blacks to protest and precipitated a move by African Americans for control of those institutions of higher learning. Black intellectuals, journalists, and editors spoke out against the discriminatory practices of the white presidents of Black colleges and supported the student protests. In 1926, the first results of the struggle for control over the institutions of higher learning for Blacks came when Mordecai Johnson became Howard University's first Black president and Blacks began to gain control over their other institutions.

Around this time the Harlem Renaissance was at its highest peak as Black artists, musicians, writers and actors contributed to the knowledge base from which schools could draw their material for teaching and further research. One

person who was a contemporary of this movement was Carter G. Woodson who wrote Miseducation of the Negro. In this book he criticized the educational system of this country and its negative effect on Blacks. Woodson advocated change in the direction and content of the education for Blacks. He considered "the educational system as it had developed both in Europe and America an antiquated process which did not hit the mark even in the case of the needs of the white man himself. He said that if the white man wants to hold on to it, let him do so; but the Negro, so far as he is able, should develop and carry out a program of his own."[13] He believed that Blacks were daily educated in a philosophy and ethics that promoted the white men as strong, the consequence being Blacks seeing their status as one of weakness which was divinely ordained. He further believed that during the last three decades of freedom Blacks had done practically nothing to change that concept.[14] Woodson advocated for African Americans an education which would prepare them to think and do for themselves as well as equip them to compete and keep pace in new developments. In other words, he advocated an education that would prepare one to change. However, little was done to implement any of the changes suggested by Woodson and today his message is as pertinent as it was in 1933.

As Woodson was proposing a new curricula which could produce creative thinkers rather than imitators, the NAACP, in the 1930's started a campaign for equal educational opportunities to be acquired within an integrated school system. For the next twenty-four years the NAACP used the judicial system to test the "separate but equal" proposition. In Missouri the United States Supreme Court said the state was obligated to provide equal facilities for Blacks or admit them to existing facilities. Between 1948 and 1950 the law schools at the University of Oklahoma and Texas were required to accept Black students. The United States Supreme Court told Oklahoma State that Black students must receive the same treatment at the hands of the state as other students.

Thus, when the Brown vs. Topeka decision was passed, Blacks had struggled for nearly one hundred years to acquire an education and had participated in creating public schools and institutions of higher learning. Although the 1954 decision said "separate was unequal" eleven states set the stage for the current situation and passed one hundred, forty-five laws between 1954 and 1958 to maintain segregation. Those who wanted to maintain the old system made a feverish effort to increase the budgets of Black schools, to upgrade the standards and buildings, increase the salaries of Black teachers, and institute a more varied curriculum.[15]

A few public schools and white colleges began to integrate. Blacks responded to their disillusionment, the foot dragging, and the lack of enforcement to the court order by massive demonstrations. Across the South, Black students began what was to become known as the "Negro revolt." Black educators and psychologists articulated the need for parents to participate in the education of their children. Alvin Poussaint, a Black psychiatrist, advocated parent involvement in the assignment of teachers and the selection of the curriculum and texts. He also insisted that parents should be involved in evaluating the attitudes and determining the style of teaching utilized by the teachers of Blacks. If judged to be racist, then those teachers should not be permitted to teach Black youngsters.[16]

The revolting action of Black students and the various philosophies of education for Blacks were being initiated at the same time Blacks were entering white institutions of higher learning in greater numbers. By 1978, almost half of all Black students attending college were enrolled in such institutions. However, only a very small percentage of the faculties of white institutions were Blacks. Consequently, Black students and a few liberal white supporters who were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's demanded a more relevant curriculum and one that represented the role and contributions of Black Americans to this

country. They demanded an end to institutional racism and the use of restricting quotas on the number of Black faculty and students on white campuses. Thus, by 1970, many predominately white colleges had established Afro-American Studies programs and departments. These departments and programs brought another perspective to the cultural bias of the general education of all youths and young adults. It is this formalizing of the study of the Black experience that precipitated the emphasis on the roles and experiences of women.

At about the same time these changes in the curriculum were taking place, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare instituted affirmative action. Each college and university was required to have a plan which would set goals for hiring women and minorities in their institutions. Such requirements brought about a concern on the part of white males that minorities and women would be hired rather than qualified white men and the new phrase reverse discrimination came into use.

As a result of the affirmative action requirement and the desegregation mandate, there was a flight to the suburbs. A number of white middle class and a few Blacks fearful of the poor quality of education for their children placed them in private or suburban schools. The tax base of the cities declined and a decrease in revenue base for education occurred causing a deterioration in the quality of education in the central cities. Requests for funds to upgrade the curriculum and provide for general maintenance of quality public education was rejected at the polls. As the public began to take a hard line against increased taxes, the teachers began to seek salary increases and smaller class sizes and all these issues coincided with the inflation escalation. These issues describe the current situation facing us today.

In spite of these responses to the 1954 decision, there were a few positive changes made in the delivery of education. Integration, the Civil Rights Movement

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and the demands for a relevant curriculum required teachers to become more responsive to the diversity of their student bodies. An effort was made to have the cultural and racial backgrounds of the various minorities reflected in the curriculum. Magnet schools were developed and bilingual programs were introduced. Afro-American history and literature were incorporated into the curriculum of some schools and the staff, faculty, and administrators of some institutions began to reflect the minority presence and perspective. A number of private Black schools were started, publishing companies were initiated to increase the availability of information, and museums were developed. All were poorly funded but indicated the awareness of some Blacks to meet the educational needs of the Black community. There was a movement on the part of Blacks into disciplines and areas heretofore they had not entered.

As these positive but small steps were being initiated, some subtle changes were taking place and were to adversely impact Black and some other minority youngsters. Special education classes, ability grouping sections and suspensions and expulsions as disciplinary measures were to have far reaching effects on Black and other minority youngsters. The special education classes and ability grouping sections had a disproportionate number of minorities and became segregated classrooms within desegregated schools. More minorities than white suffered from disciplinary actions which put the children out of the school for a brief period and in some cases permanently.

Consequently, in 1984 segregation, particularly in large urban areas, remains a critical issue. Presently a large number of Black youth both in Northern and Southern schools are attending educational institutions that have an enrollment of 50% minorities. In the Northern districts 30% of the Black students are in schools which are 90% minority and in the Southern district there are 15%.

It seems clear from this discussion that eighty-nine years before the Brown vs. Topeka decision and thirty years after this case that efforts to improve the

educational situation for Blacks has been a difficult struggle with positive changes clouded by negative setbacks. It would seem the question before us is what can we learn from the varied experiences we have faced in the pursuit of an education and what positive changes have our efforts or struggles brought to the educational system for Blacks in this country.

Certainly we can agree there have been some changes. In the markets of this country and those of the world the needs of the workforce have greatly changed. However, few Blacks have been educated to face these changes. We are in a highly scientific and technological period with few Blacks prepared to meet the current challenges. As a result, Blacks are found in large numbers in low paying non-skilled areas of the work force and in the marginal academic pursuits in the institutions of higher learning. We have not as a group taken responsibility for seeing to it that our children are given the necessary education nor have we developed a philosophy which will prepare our youth to cope with changes.

In the past, we have had to face the question of ability and aptitude tests and still must do so today. Since Post Reconstruction, white America has frequently used tests to force us to make detours. Education is not a free and open system at its best and for Black Americans that has been especially true as a result of testing along with other issues such as money and housing. You must test to get in school, through school, and to graduate. You test to get a job or to go on to college and professional school and once out of the professional school, you must test to pass the boards. A number of psychologists have proven that the tests are racially and culturally biased against Blacks with the results being failure or low test scores. These tests prevent the students from continuing their education and force large numbers into low paying non-skilled work.

In spite of the fact that by 1978 almost half of all Black students attending college were enrolled in white institutions, the Black colleges and universities

were and still are graduating the greatest numbers of Black men and women and most of our leaders have graduated from these institutions. This has great implications for the survival of our historically Black institutions of higher learning. We may have our foot in the door of the predominately white institutions today but it may be closed tomorrow. The questions being raised concerning the quality of education and the instituting of testing as a response to improve that quality needs to be carefully monitored. If we have no Black institution of learning to turn to where shall we go if the white institutions begin to limit Black and minority enrollment by testing. To start all over again building institutions would be difficult because of the economy and our lack of needed resources. Furthermore, I'm not so sure we have many Mary McCleod Bethune's and Booker T. Washington's who can build new institutions.

There are some studies which support the positive aspects of an integrated education. Children have an opportunity to learn about and appreciate differences. There are reports with evidence to support the fact that desegregation helps students learn. However, these positive results came about only with careful and thorough planning and preparation. The teachers, students, parents, and administrators were prepared to make the change from an all white to an integrated school and provided for a minority presence in all administrative and staff levels. There have been a few success stories involving integration but for the most part public education has made little overall gain in integration and presently is facing great financial difficulties. If the past is any indication, the ultimate victims of these difficulties are and will be Black children.

In the book, Black Educator: Myth and Tragedies, Thomas Sowell said that "Black people are often seen as a problem and recipients of benefits rather than the creator of something." He proposed that as a race we do have the intellectual capital to create. However, to produce a first-rate education we will have to

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begin by finding out what has been done and with what results. Until we as a people stop approaching the quality of education as a moral issue and realize it is a political and power issue, we will forever be recipients. We cannot continue to depend only on litigation, protests, laws, and desegregation to meet the commitment to education. We must make education a priority by establishing goals and objectives and a plan for implementation based on the past experiences, present conditions, and trends for the future of Black people specifically and Americans in general. The Brown vs. Topeka decision set the tone for an enormous challenge yet to be met for educational change.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, Long Memory: The Black Experience in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 263.

2. Henry Allen Bullock, History of Negro Education in the South (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1967), pp. 10-11.

3. Gerder Lerner, ed. Black Women in White America (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 32.

4. Berry and Blassingame, p. 263.

5. Bullock, p. 12.

6. Ibid., pp. 12-14.

7. John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1980), pp. 208-209.

8. Ibid., pp. 236-237.

9. Ibid., pp. 209-210.

10. Bullock, pp. 19-31.

11. Berry and Blassingame, p. 262.

12. Ibid., pp. 265-266.

13. Carter G. Woodson, Miseducation of the Negro (Washington D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. xxxii.

14. Ibid.

15. Bullock, p. 260.

16. Ibid., p. 284.

17. U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1976), p. 153.

18. Thomas Sowell, Black Education: Myth and Tragedies (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972), p. 313.